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AUTHOR Pinkett, Kathleen E. L.; Quay, Lorene C.
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ABSTRACT

Preschool children with low rates of social interaction have been considered to be maladapted, at risk for future difficulties, and in need of social skills training. To determine the validity of this theory, a total of 112 black and white middle SES preschool children identified as occupied low social interactors (distinguished from unoccupied, withdrawn, socially isolated low interactors) moderate social interactors, and high social interactors were compared on social competence. Participants attended seven preschool classrooms in two racially integrated, private schools. No group differences were found. This finding suggests that preschoolers identified as low interactors occupied with constructive, goal-directed, purposeful, or creative activities are as socially competent as preschoolers with moderate and high rates of social interaction. Questions are raised about the practice of considering all preschool children with low rates of social interaction as maladjusted. Attitudinal and educational implications are discussed. Eighteen references are included. (Author/RH)

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Social Competence in Three Types of Preschool Social Interactors

Kathleen E. L. Pinkett* and Lorene C. Quay

Georgia State University

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*Kathleen E. L. Pinkett is now at Kennesaw College, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Marietta, Georgia 30061.

Abstract

Preschool children identified as occupied low social interactors (distinguished from unoccupied, withdrawn, socially isolated low interactors), moderate social interactors, and high social interactors were compared on social competence. No group differences were found. This finding suggests that preschoolers identified as low interactors occupied with constructive, goal-directed, purposeful, or creative activities are as socially competent as preschoolers with moderate and high rates of social interaction. Questions are raised about the practice of considering all preschool children with low rates of social interaction as maladjusted. Attitudinal and educational implications are discussed.

Social Competence in Three Types of Preschool Social Interactors

Preschool children with low rates of social interaction have been considered to be maladapted, at risk for future difficulties, and in need of social skills training (Hartup, 1970; 1978). However, the question of whether low rates of interaction are maladaptive for all children is being raised (Asher, Markell & Hymel, 1981; Rubin, 1982). Although a high rate of peer social interaction has been considered important to social and cognitive development, there is evidence that some children who are not highly interactive are just as popular (Gottman, 1977) and socially and cognitively competent (Jennings, 1975) as their more socially interactive peers. These children who seem to be socially competent despite their low rates of social interaction are likely to be those who occupy themselves with constructive, creative, or educational activities, rather than the ones who are characteristically unoccupied or simply watching others. The relationship between social interaction and the development of social competence is unclear and difficult to understand. It seems logical to expect that children who spend little time in social interaction would be less socially competent than those who interact frequently, since the low interactors would miss

opportunities to learn appropriate social behavior through the give and take with their peers.

Social competence is a complex hypothetical construct with no universally accepted definition or assessment approach. It encompasses cognitive and affective variables that are difficult to separate and measure (Anderson & Messick, 1974); O'Malley, 1977; Zigler & Trickett, 1978). Thus, a diversity of child characteristics and assessment methods have been used to define and measure social competence. The characteristics considered to be descriptive of social competence have been: (a) effective social interaction (Connolly & Doyle, 1981; Jennings, 1975; Wright, 1980); (b) ability to gain material and emotional wishes from others in socially acceptable ways (Bakeman & Brown, 1980); (c) peer visual regard and attention (Waters, Garber, Gornal, & Vaughn, 1983); (d) conformity to routines (Lippitt, 1941); (e) absence of problem behavior (Behar & Stringfield, 1974; Kohn & Rosman, 1973; Rubin, 1982); and (f) adaptive sociability, independence, and social responsibility (Levine, Elzey, & Lewis, 1969). The most common approaches to social competence assessment have been (a) classroom behavioral observations (Waters et. al., 1983; Wright, 1980), (b) teacher ratings (Behar & Stringfield, 1974; Kohn & Rosman, 1973; Levine, Elzey, & Lewis, 1969), and (c) sociometric ratings (Connolly & Doyle, 1981).

In studying social competence in preschoolers, both Jennings (1975) and Wright (1980) defined the construct as "effective" social interaction. Wright (1980) reported that it was the effectiveness of social influence attempts, rather than the frequency of those attempts, that described social competence. In a comparison of people-oriented and object-oriented preschoolers, Jennings (1975) found no difference between the two groups on tests of social knowledge, which she equated with social competence. These findings suggest that those children who do not engage in frequent social interactions but who occupy themselves with object-oriented activities are as socially competent as preschoolers who more frequently engage in socially-oriented activities.

Rubin (1982) distinguished between low interactors who engaged in noninteractive constructive play and low interactors who engaged in noninteractive purposeless play. However, he did not compare the social competence of interactors and noninteractors. Preschool children identified as occupied low social interactors (distinguished from unoccupied, withdrawn interactors), moderate social interactors, and high social interactors have not been compared on social competence. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare preschool children identified as occupied low social interactors, moderate social interactors, and high social interactors on social competence.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 112 black and white middle SES preschool children. All the children from seven preschool classrooms in two racially integrated private schools were included in the study. The mean age was 4 years, 11 months, with a standard deviation of 8 months. The sample consisted of 47 boys and 85 girls; 85 black and 27 white subjects.

Procedure

Each subject was observed during free play by means of a time-sampling procedure, in which 5-second observation periods were followed by 10-second recording periods, for a total of twenty minutes over a four-month span. Social play behaviors observed and recorded were (a) peer interaction, (b) noninteraction, (c) occupied, and (d) unoccupied.

Reliability of the play behaviors was established on two different occasions by the investigator and three other observers. Reliability was computed on both the occurrence and the nonoccurrence of each behavior. The formula for computing reliability was the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. For the occurrence of behaviors, the mean interobserver agreement was .92. For the nonoccurrence of behaviors, the mean interobserver agreement was .95.

Low interactors, moderate interactors, and high interactors were classified on the basis of the classroom distribution for social interaction. The lowest and highest 20% for social interaction were indicated in order to evaluate children on their classroom group. Low interactors were defined as the children who fell in the bottom 20% of their class for social interaction. High interactors were those children who were in the top 20% of their classroom group for social interaction. Moderate interactors were those children who fell between the lowest and highest 20% within their classroom group for social interaction, i.e., the middle 60% of the class.

The low interactors were further identified as either unoccupied or occupied. Those low interactors who were one standard deviation above the mean for frequency of unoccupied behavior were targeted as unoccupied. The low interactors who were one standard deviation below the mean for frequency of unoccupied behavior were classified as occupied. Five identified unoccupied low interactors were not included in the analysis, since they were, by definition, neither (object- (task) nor people-oriented. This procedure resulted in the selection of 20 occupied low interactors, 60 moderate interactors, and 25 high interactors.

Each subject was also assessed on social competence by means of the Levine, Elzey, and Lewis (1969) California Preschool Competence Scale, a teacher-rating scale. The Levine et. al. (1969) definition of social competence was adopted for this study. They defined social competence as: (a) adaptive sociability, indicated by interpersonal behaviors in the classroom; (b) social responsibility, indicated by such behaviors as relying on self, autonomously making transitions and following directions, and intently playing alone; and (c) independence, indicated by relying on self, autonomously making transitions and following directions, and intently playing alone.

Results

To ascertain whether the occupied low social interactors, moderate social interactors, and high social interactors differed on social competence, a one-way ANOVA was computed. The ANOVA yielded no significant differences amont the three groups, indicating that the occupied low interactors ($\underline{M}$ = 83.20), were not significantly different from the moderate social interactors ($\underline{M}$ = 92.61) nor the high social interactors ($\underline{M}$ = 91.64) in social competence.

Discussion

The finding that teachers rated occupied low interactors as being socially competent is consistent with Rubin's (1982) results. Although he used a different definition of social competence, Rubin (1982) reported that teachers rated children who engaged in solitary and parallel constructive play as socially competent.

Despite the diverse definitions and methods of assessment, researchers consistently report that social competence is related to factors other than frequency of social interaction (Asher, 1983; Bakeman & Brown, 1980; Jennings, 1975; Wright, 1980). One possible explanation, supported by the teacher ratings, is that even though the occupied low interactors infrequently engaged in social play, when they did interact with their peers, they were competent in interpersonal behaviors. It is likely that occupied low interactors choose to play alone in order to pursue their own interests. On the other hand, that group of unoccupied low interactors that was not included in the sample may be forced into noninteraction because for some reason they are unable to attract their peers and their peers do not choose to play with them (Asher, et. al., 1981). The practice of combining occupied and unoccupied low interactors into a single, homogenous group may have obscured the relationships between rate of interaction and other variables.

The finding that those children whose low rates of social interaction are combined with interests, objects, or activities were as socially competent as the moderate and high interactors suggests that these children should not be viewed as maladapted. Caution is advised in including these children in special programs that are planned for young children with low rates of social interaction.

Author Note

Requests for reprints should be sent to Kathleen E. L. Pinkett, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kennesaw College, Marietta, Georgia 30061.

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